1: Childs M-5 (1924-1940) 1949 FP 13 Mbundu FP 13

On nights when there is little or no moonlight, the evening gatherings in the village sometimes, although not always, follow the sex division, with the men and boys in the *onjango*, and the women and girls at one or more of the kitchens. Discussion of affairs, with youth listening to age, is the usual order, but the time is often passed in the recital of folk-tales or in propounding riddles.

Riddles are more especially a field of youth but age also enjoys hearing the answers given. A favourite occupation of the men, especially by day, is *ocela*, a game known all over Africa and in other parts of the world as well.[1] Junod calls it 'the national game of Africa'.[2]

The Ovimbundu have brought recreation to the service of their work. Europeans are often irritated by the amount of conversation which Ovimbundu carry on during working hours, but on consideration it may be found that were it not for the conversation and other psychological aids, the work might be quite unendurable. This is especially the case with regard to road work and many types of contract labour. Road songs and work songs are of real help in keeping up morale and in prolonging endurance. Most of them seem to have been developed in the days of the caravan trade, but they have not been forgotten and are now used on many occasions.

A word about ceremonial occasions before leaving the social life of the village. Some rites and ceremonies are celebrated so quietly that they are not even social occasions. Most of them, however, are very social. This is especially true of funerals and post-mortuary rites. During visits to Ngendo I was able to witness two post-mortuary rites and the funeral of an important person of a near-by village. Other ceremonial occasions, such as weddings and a return from a trading expedition, also call for much sociability, but funerals and post-mortuary rites are the social occasions which occupy the most time and attention and make for the greatest conviviality.

[1] Known under the name *Mancala*, which is evidently a Bantu word, or taken from one; cf. the Umbundu *oku mangala*, to play. Hambly mentions *ocela*, op. cit., p. 219. See also Nevinson, op. cit., p. 91. The *New Standard Dictionary* (Funk and Wagnalls) attributes to Arabian origin both the game and the word *Mankalah*.

[2] H. A. Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe*, 2nd ed., vol. i, p. 345 f.

1: Childs M-5 (1924-1940) 1949 FP 13 Mbundu FP 13

observation, and not in his own house. During that time he will not be allowed to *tumisa*. Or again, 'the girl's parents may warn her saying, Should the boy try *to sting*[1] you, do not let him: do not stay, but run away.'[2] All informants stress the point that the chief purpose of the custom is that the two young people may come to know each other as well as possible with marriage in view. There are severe sanctions against premarital pregnancy; fines to be paid by the young man or his family, lessened desirability for the girl in marriage, and a distinction in the ceremony between brides who are virgin and those who are not. Proofs of virginity are required on the marriage morning. Those families and regions which have girls' initiation camps include in the procedure a test of virginity.[3] There are not the periodic tests of virginity which are found among the Zulus, Mpondos, &c.,[4] but the Ovimbundu do not expect that the contact will be as close as these other tribes evidently do.[5] The closest parallel which I know is with the (American) colonial custom of 'bundling'.

It is said that the custom of *uponji* has been in a decadent state for a long time. This is not only because of its having been misunderstood and forbidden by the church or the missions.[6] Although this is partly the case, the chief difficulty came from the time of the rubber trade (1874–1900) when young men began without ceremony to go to the kitchens to sleep with girls instead of properly arranging matters. Whether their affluence made them reckless (i.e. of expected fines, &c.), or whether they were apeing Europeans or the customs of other tribes, is not known. At any rate, it is said that for large numbers of people this put an end to propriety. Numbers of Europeans began to settle in the country from 1891 (Viye) and 1903 (Bailundu and elsewhere), and from then until now casual relations have very greatly increased year by year.[7] That the Ovimbundu have held to their traditional forms

[1] *Lumana*, euphemism for immission.

[2] From a statement by R. Kavita Evambi of C[illegible].

[3] A pullet's egg is used for the test (manuscript by R. Kavita Evambi).

[4] Krige in Schapera, 1937, op. cit., p. 110 f.

[5] Among the songs which I have collected are two sung by girls to tease the young men and with references to nights spent in *uponji*.

[6] *Uvaisi* has been used in translations for 'fornication' or 'adultery' and used so persistently that it has now nearly come to have those meanings. The *Umbundu–English Vocabulary* (1911) gave a correct definition for *eponji* but not for *uponji*; its references to *ombaisi* and *uvaisi* are likewise in error, while *tumisa* is not listed.

[7] Information from R. Kalupeteka and others.

1: Childs M-5 (1924-1940) 1949 FP 13 Mbundu FP 13

797

Photo. D. G. Rideout

a. Baptismal service by the Rev. J. H. Cilûlû

797
585

b. Umbundu wedding, new-style Ekuku church in the background

[Facing p. 154]

and young manhood, and to which he will bring his wife. In this house a kind of trial marriage *(uponji)* takes place. The young man will *oku tumisa* ("cause to send") a male friend to ask permission of a girl's mother and also to bring her to his house each night. The girl is called *eponji*. (The custom may also be called *uvaisi*, the girl *ombaisi*.) A young man may first tumisa at about seventeen or eighteen years, if he has sufficient money or goods to make the "betrothal" payment (*itambelo* - "enticements" or *oku lupula ikuelume* - "chasing away jealousies"). The amount of the payment (which is made to the girl's parents) varies with locality, wealth and status, but is usually about one tenth of the amount of the marriage payment proper. The amounts of both payments are increasing rapidly.(1) The nature of the intercourse is carefully circumscribed, and the girl is warned by her mother not to let intromission take place. Proofs of virginity are required on the marriage morning, and there are severe sanctions against premarital pregnancy. Childs' informants stressed that the chief purpose of the custom is that the two young people should get to know each other as well as possible with marriage in view. Ennis however(2) states that *uvaisi* does not necessarily lead to marriage and may be entered upon without the intention of marriage; the girl may leave the man if she does not like him, and if the *uvaisi* is broken off both may marry other persons without any difficulties.

INITIATION(3)

Tribal initiation for boys *(oku lisevisa evamba)* and girls *(uso wakai)* is carried on in camps or "schools" in the southern and south-eastern Umbundu chiefdoms, especially in Kalukembe, Kakonda, and Ngalangi. Sporadic instances of individual camps have also occurred recently in Viye, Bailundu, Sambu, Wambu, Cingolo and Cikuma. Even in regions where camps are regularly held, only the children of certain families enter. There appears to have been some passing on of the custom by heredity, and, in general, there is intermarriage only between families and individuals who adhere to the initiation rites. It is not known whether the rites have been taken over by the Ovimbundu from neighbouring peoples, or whether they represent a custom formerly widespread in Umbundu country. Initiation camps are not mentioned by the earlier writers.

Childs gives little information about what goes on in initiation camps, apart from pointing out that in making a definite break from the routine of life they contrast with other aspects of Umbundu education, and that "the hardship and cruelty of initiation camps have their parallel in the trading and slave-raiding expeditions of the past." His statement that "as an 'educational institution' [the initiation camps] do not seem to fit into the culture" is not very clear. From the few details given by Hambly(4) Umbundu camps appear to be identical with those of the tribes to the east, and here one of the most important aspects of the camps is their ritually-emphasised contrast with regular life.(5)

(1) Childs, personal communication.
(2) 1945.
(3) Childs, op.cit., pp.115-7.
(4) (2) 1934, pp.226f.
(5) See McCulloch, 1951, pp.85-91.

561

Vakuacisoko (lit. "those of the set")(1)

572

Childs consideres that the custom of *vacuacisoko* is probably connected with circumcision and initiation. It does not exist throughout the territory but only in certain families who belong to the order and are said to pass it on by heredity. It seems to have been stronger in the past, but few practising members of the set are now known. All 'coevals' or members of the set were in duty bound to render mutual assistance, and all had mutual rights to the property of the others without complaint or remedy. These rights seem to have included that of having intercourse with each other's wives. Injury or even death of one member brought about by another did not allow the injured family to seek revenge or legal redress. It was the duty of the *vacuacisoko* to bury their fellows, themselves digging the grave and attending to all the expenses ordinarily supplied by the family of the deceased. They also had the duty of burying strangers without family who would not be buried by others for fear of defilement or responsibility for their debts.(2) Childs describes the *vacuacisoko* associations as "age-grade sets",(3) but gives no further explanation.

883

"With or without initiation rites, adolescence is largely preparation for marriage and full adult life. Traditionally, adolescence is not a time of conflict or stress....Contract and *corvée* labour have brought profound changes, especially for the young men. As for the girls, a few have gone into the towns; relatively few, however, other than those who attend a boarding-school, lead a life essentially different from that which has been traditionally theirs."(4)

177

MARRIAGE

582

Available information concerning degrees of relationship in which marriage is permitted, marriage-payment, polygyny and divorce has been given above.(5) Evambi(6) and Hambly(7) describe some of the customs and ceremonies connected with marriage.

585

For three nights after the commencement of the marriage ceremony the girl sleeps with her own parents, while the married woman and six unmarried girls whom she has chosen as her attendants sleep in the house of her husband. On the fourth day she moves to the man's house, bringing her cooking utensils. For the first month, according to Hambly, or, according to Evambi, the first year, i.e. until the grain is ripe in her new fields, she lives with her husband's mother or aunt, in whose kitchen she cooks food each night to send to her husband in the *onjango*. When her first child is two or three months old, a present of a pig passes from the girl's mother to her husband.

[606]

585

Childs(8) adds that adulthood comes with marriage, and marriage is only recognised as complete when the first child has been born. A child or an adolescent is only a "potential" person *(osunu)* and the permanency

(1) Childs, op.cit., p.115.
(2) Those who buried a man were considered responsible for his debts. Hence corpses were often placed in trees.
(3) Childs, op.cit., p.59.
(4) Ibid., p.117.
(5) Pp.20f.
(6) 1938.
(7) 1934, pp.180f.
(8) Op.cit., pp.119-20.

584 you." There is no infant betrothal. There is not and never was any
[567] compulsion of a girl in marriage, but slave girls were disposed of in marriage by their masters.

832 A girl is not allowed to do anything to show that she loves a boy, for it would be a great shame for her to tell the boy that she loves him. Often a girl who prefers a boy will pretend that she does not like him.
[539] The Ovimbundu have a story which states that a man said, "I will bring my cow to the green grass"; he did so, but the cow would not eat. This expresses the idea that a boy would not like a girl who confessed a preference for him.

MARRIAGE

585 The prospective bride chooses one married woman and six unmarried girls to accompany her to the house prepared by her husband. Here a feast consisting of a pig and some chickens is provided by the husband for the relatives of both families. For three nights the girl returns to the house of her parents while the boy sleeps at his home. The married woman and six girls sleep at the house prepared by the bridegroom. During these days beer is provided by the boy's parents. The prospective husband is ironically addressed as *sandombua*. *Ndombua* means bridegroom, *sa* is an abbreviation of *isia* meaning father. The term "father bridegroom" refers to the fact that the youth is a potential husband only; the marriage has not been consummated.

On the fourth day the bride brings her supply of domestic utensils. These are the cooking pots (*olombia*); the wooden spoons (*ovito*); the brush of grass for sweeping (*olueyo*); some meal; also the pounder (*upi*). For the first month the wife is not allowed to cook in her own home; she cooks food in the home of her husband's parents and sends
[264] it to the council house (*onjango*) where her husband takes his meals with other men according to Umbundu custom. At the end of the first month of married life the mother of the husband invites any three old women who have been happily married to lay the hearth
[782] stones in the new home. Each of the old women brings a stone for the hearth. A chicken is killed and its blood is sprinkled on the hearth stones. While the young wife is preparing food at the new hearth, she is helped by the old women. If the girl is stirring with the big wooden spoon, one of the old women places her own hands over those of the girl. There is this kind of guidance in every action.

I understand that at the present day virginity in a bride is not so highly valued as in former days. The old custom was an examination

3: Hambly E-5 (1929-1930) 1934 FP13 Mbundu FP13

of the girl by her husband, and if she were not a virgin he took a hot stick from the fire and burned a hole through her loin cloth. "The girl began to cry, but she had to take the burned cloth to her mother." In such an instance there does not seem to be an idea of guilt. The husband had accepted something that was damaged, and the payment of a pig by the girl's parents reunited the two young people. In former days, also at present, there are boy and girl companions who sleep together, supposedly without having sexual connections, although they may be seventeen years of age. The girl calls the boy *ombaisi*, and he calls her by the same name. The Ovimbundu understand something of the physiology of conception; the woman is, however, regarded as only a receiving vessel. "The man puts something into her which grows."

Husband and wife do not sleep in the same bed during the wife's menstrual period; the wife sleeps on a mat at the side of her husband's bed. A woman who is menstruating never cooks food, but women give mutual aid in this matter. A man with more than one wife sleeps either four nights or seven nights with each; the four-night cycle is more usual than the seven-night cycle among the Ovimbundu. Each wife has a separate hut and kitchen. There is no wife lending, but a visitor may be provided with a widow or even with an unmarried girl. Then the man would have to pay the woman.

Ngonga was able to give information with regard to homosexuality. "There are men who want men, and women who want women." Ngonga says he has heard people talk about it, and "they think this very bad." A woman has been known to make an artificial penis for use with another woman. The medicine-man will sometimes dress as a woman. Ngonga, who has seen a man dress as a woman, stated that the man arranged his cloth like that of a woman, put palm oil on his hair, and joined the women to pound corn on the rocks. "The other people laughed and spoke bad words to him. His brother, father, and uncle beat him," but without producing reformation.

DIVORCE

There are many grounds on which a man may secure a divorce, but it does not follow that divorce is frequent. On the contrary the evidence indicates that the majority of difficulties are overcome by a compromise between the relations of the husband and those of the wife. The main causes of dissatisfaction with a wife are want of ability in cultivating her garden, physical weakness, a habit of thieving from the gardens of other women, incompetence in cooking,

6:Edwards E-5 (1955-1956)1962
FP13 Mbundu FP13

man has four daughters he will receive the bridewealth only for the two oldest. The mother's brother will receive the bridewealth for the third sister and a brother for the fourth. If the father is dead, the payment is made to a mother's brother or a brother real or classificatory. To some extent the size of the bridewealth is a reflection of the status of the girl—thus on the railway line 1,000 escudos (£12. 10s.) might be paid for a girl who could read and write. In my own area a Gumba man might pay more for a girl from Ndjandju than for a Cela girl because Ndjandju is regarded, owing to its proximity to the mission, as being more civilized. There exist also counter-gifts. Ndjoleya, who as mother's brother received the bridewealth for Feliciana, gave a pig to Daniel, and it is customary for a pig to be given to the husband by his wife's father on the birth of their first child.[11]

The Umbundu word for marriage *oku kwela* is applied both to customary marriage and to Christian marriage. To distinguish between the two, Portuguese words are taken over, *amigar* (originally, to live in concubinage) being used for the customary marriage, and *casar* (to marry) being used for marriage in church. The use of *amigar* of a particular marriage implies that the people making it are pagans, or Christians who have omitted the church ceremony for one reason or another. In Gumba the church marriage, while it gives status among Christians is not an important occasion in the local milieu, and people who have been through the church marriage but who have not made the *wala*, the traditional wedding feast, are not permitted by their senior kin to cohabit. Around the mission the church ceremony is regarded as the important thing, and the *wala* seems to be thought of simply as a party. Traditionally and usually at the present day the *wala* is held in the dry season.

In the wedding feast there are a number of variations between one occasion and another, but a general outline can

[11] Hastings, p. 110, states that a year or two after the birth of the first child another pig is given which is called the pig of cutting off. The giving and the accepting of this severes all responsibilities between the families. The women can no more be returned to her father's people for misdemeanour—only in the case of the death of her husband will she be taken back.

6:Edwards E-5 (1955-1956)1962
FP13 Mbundu FP13

585 be described.[18] The bride, if she belongs to another village, will arrive in the evening accompanied by some girls who are kin to her. She sits down on the bed in the house of the bridegroom with her companions. A crowd of people of the village and neighbourhood dance in and about the hut and people come in to talk to the bride. The bridegroom may also come in and sit on the bed with friends, but he will not take any particular notice of his bride. The dancing will go on till well into the night. This usually happens on a Saturday night so that the main part of the festivity will fall on the Sunday which all Ovimbundu, Christian or pagan, observe as a day of rest.

On the Sunday morning little will happen, though there may be some dancing and the bride and her companions will comb one another's hair. In the afternoon (usually about four), the time being told by the sun, comes the procession and the feast. For the procession bride and bridegroom walk together, both dressed in as European style of clothing as can be obtained. The procession advances dancing and singing, with the exception of the bridegroom and bride whose sedateness is striking. On the way an archway may be erected, made of branches. Under this, concealed in a blanket, will be lying the father's sister or other senior kinswoman of the groom to whom he will make a present of money. Continuing, the couple will arrive at an enclosure built for the purpose with a wooden framework covered over on the sides with branches with leaves on and mats, where a table is laid in European style at which the customary Umbu-
[263] ndu food, mush made from maize flour, and relish (that is almost anything, meat or vegetables, which is not mush) is served. Others besides the bride and bridegroom are allowed into the enclosure—this is not a private rite. It is at this point that *oku fwikisa* takes place, that is, the feeding of affines to break down avoidances. Food is served to the guests on basket plates, one plate per village represented. The actual serving will be done by kinsmen or friends of the bridegroom. After the meal will come further dancing.

The next day a party of kin and fellow-villagers may set out

[18] For accounts of the traditional marriage ceremony see Hastings, pp. 94–101 and R. K. Evambi, 'The Marriage Customs of the Ovimbundu', *Africa*, 1938, pp. 342–8.

6:Edwards E-5 (1955-1956)1962
FP13 Mbundu FP13

for the bride's village. Here they may be greeted with formal speeches of welcome in Portuguese, a usage copied from the reception of missionaries.

One only turns up to a wedding if one has been invited, and not everybody who is a kinsman living in the neighbourhood is invited. Nor is there any marked distinction between kin and non-kin in the ceremony, except for the ending of avoidances and the recognition of the father's sister, who is recompensed for her services as nursemaid. Village membership is significantly recognized in the distribution of food, and the sending of the party to the bride's home to represent the bridegroom's village.

Umbundu marriage is virilocal, although a certain number of marriages are within the village. Apart from such marriages, it seems to be rare to find a man settling in a village because his wife has kin there.

Although during the early months of the marriage the bridegroom's mother may supervise the bride's work, the individual household is essentially an independent unit[13] and was not even in the past merged with other household units to form a 'grandfamily'. This independence is not isolation. I have only a very few times seen houses with any sort of compound about them. Much of domestic life, eating, working, resting, talking, may be done out of doors in front of the house. Paying visits is a great feature of village life especially when the day's work is over, although there is also a term *oku pasula*, to visit in the morning, referring to what are usually just short calls, involving the exchange of greetings. Perhaps the opportunity of calling and being called on is one of the factors maintaining the village as a social unit. The idea that a man should not eat with his wife still survives to some extent so that questions on this topic receive contradictory answers. Observation shows that even among the men who travelled on the caravans, eating with one's wife is the general practice.

One of the most striking features of Umbundu domestic life is the close companionship which exists between husband and wife and which is unquestionably a modern development.[14]

[13] See Magyar, pp. 261–3.

[14] The role of the *Ondjango* as described by Childs and Hastings indicates that a man's normal companions both for eating and recreation were other men.